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New Approaches are Vital if Irish Catholicism is to have a Future

John Littleton

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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RITE AND REASON

New approaches are vital if Irish Catholicism is to have a future

Where to for the Catholic Church in Ireland following the Murphy report?

WHEN ONE thinks back to the visit by pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979, one could credibly assume that the future of the Catholic Church was secure on this island. Fast forward 30 years to November 26th, 2009, and there is a completely different scenario.

That was the date on which the Murphy report was published amid a flurry of public anger and indignation. It did not help that it came so soon after the Ferns (2005) and Ryan (2009) reports that chronicled horrific crimes perpetrated on young people by some priests and religious.

The Murphy commission was set up in 2006 to investigate how church and State authorities dealt with allegations of clerical child abuse in the Dublin archdiocese from 1975-2004.

There is no ambiguity about its

findings. It describes in stark terms how victims were met with “denial, arrogance and cover-up”.

The church authorities seemed to focus on avoiding scandal at all costs and showed “little or no concern for the welfare of the abused child”. The accounts are a litany of mismanagement and poor communications by church leaders.

Public opprobrium has been more directed at the church than the State, which can be explained by the fact people expect higher standards from religious and priests than politicians or gardai.

A new book offers an in-depth assessment of the repercussions of the Murphy report findings.

No right-minded person will assert that the Catholic Church has been enhanced by the revelations of cover-up, the desire to preserve the institution at all costs, the inability to put across its message adequately.

But surely the good work done by priests in parishes around the country should not be forgotten, no more than the positive contribution made by religious orders to hospitals and schools?

Yes, the abdication by the State of certain core services to the church ultimately proved unhealthy. There have indeed been hugely upsetting examples of how an institution that was allowed a relatively free hand exploited its position of power.

But important questions now need to be asked. In the wake of the demise of Catholicism as an unquestioned power bloc, what remains to replace it? Has the media the capacity to take on such a function? That is doubtful.

What about the politicians? Their image too has been seriously tarnished in recent times. It may be individual priests and religious who come to the fore, or committed lay people who realise that the times we are living through require a more proactive approach from them; or writers, philanthropists, singers – people with vision and the courage of their convictions.

One thing is certain: new approaches must be employed if Catholicism is to have a future.

One of the contributors to the book, Marie Collins, a survivor of abuse, observes the need for the hierarchy in Ireland to earn back trust and respect. She suggests that a more active laity be encouraged, as outlined in documents of Vatican II.

Another contributor, Eugene O'Brien, outlines the conflation that is "Irish and Catholic" and states: "The core issue is not how the church responds to the crisis but how we, as a society, respond to the church."

The church leadership appears unable to grasp fully the gravity of its situation. This new book, with its eclectic mix of contributors – survivors, cultural commentators, theologians, historians, journalists, a Church of Ireland bishop – interrogates Catholic Ireland post-Murphy and produces some stark findings.

The Dublin/Murphy Report: A Watershed for Irish Catholicism?, edited by John Littleton and Eamon Maher (Columba Press, €12.99)

JOHN LITTLETON
and **EAMON MAHER**

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